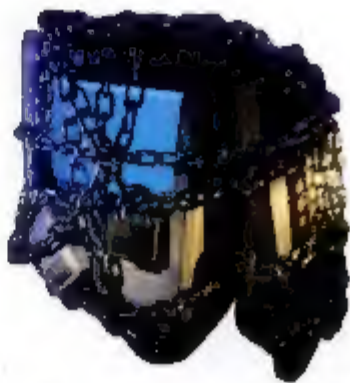




Photo by Peter



CYBER THRASH

Everyone thinks that they're nerds, but these teenage beer-guzzling hackers in their Megadeth t-shirts are the new heroes of the information age.

Eleven o'clock Saturday night, and I was headed for the DMZ again. I had a feeling the Big Kahuna would be there—and that he'd know what the hell was going on with the Cantland Box. I sure didn't, and I was making me nervous.

On the TV set outside my dim Brooklyn bedroom, the Cold War was ending. Furion Creeks gathered in plazas, East Germans ogled West Berlin shop windows—great infotainment, if you like rubble. I was after a different story. No broken bricks, no raging crowds, just phantom signals playing hide-and-seek through a fiber-optic maze that plowed across the world. On the TV screen the present was crumbling into the past. On my computer screen a future was taking shape, and the Big Kahuna was somewhere inside it.

Amber glow brightened the room as I fired up my bargain-basement IBM clone and dialed into Teletel. The modem chirped and crackled and

Article by Julian Gibbell

suddenly I was in, gliding down the Main Street of the world's computer networks. I typed in a series of numbers charging the call to a hulking defense contractor somewhere in the Midwest, then I entered the 12-digit network-user address that routed my connection across the Atlantic to a PC in France.

The cursor sat pointing for a moment, then slid across the screen, spelling out the welcome login: big black letters D, M, and Z. I entered a handle and dropped on in. It was the usual scene. A chat system capable of taking 25 callers at once, the DMZ was a hangout for hackers and phone phreaks from all over the world. A list of their handles glowed out at me from my monitor; silent and serene, but behind it a physical Cardiff swished. All those handles were passing private messages back and forth, writing deals, trading the short-lived codes, passwords, and other fetishized bits of information that are the illegal treasure of the hacker economy.

But I wasn't here to copy. I was here to find the Big Kahuna, and he was nowhere in sight. The list of handles glowed on, leaving no adding a name near and then.

There was nothing to do but wait. In France I waited in France for a kid who lived an area code away from me! Things had gotten weird so fast I'd barely noticed.

In the beginning it was all as simple as a headline: On October 4, 1989, Grumman Aerospace Corporation, a key supplier of combat aircraft to the Pentagon, sent police to arrest a 15-year-old boy for slipping into the Vax mainframe at Grumman's Long Island plant from his bedroom in Levittown, New York.

It wasn't much, just another hacker story in a year brimming with them. The biggest was on its way to court: Robert T. Morris Jr., who had foisted a worm into the defense department's national research network, unintentionally paralyzing over 6000 computers, faced five years and a \$250,000 fine. Earlier in the year a federal judge had sentenced 18-year-old Herbert Zinn Jr., aka "Shadow Hawk," to nine months in prison plus a \$10,000 fine and two and a half years' probation for sneaking into phone company systems and copying "highly sensitive" software. On the look-for circuit, computer-security hero Clifford Stoll was not plugging The Cuckoo's Egg, his nonfiction account of KGB-backed West German hackers snooping for secrets in American networks.

Nineteen eighty-nine was shaping up into the year of the hacker, and I wanted a piece of it the way some people wanted a piece of the Berlin wall. I'd been getting more obsessed with computers every day since I bought my PC, and now fed up with writing recent reviews. As things went, the Grumman bust was small potatoes, but by the conventions of the emerging media subgenre of the hacker story, it had the earmarks of a minor classic—crime, punishment, tech, innuendo, scandalous. I wanted to write it.

Looking for dirt, I opened up the latest issue of 2600, "The Hacker Quarterly," a Long Island-based zine. It was filled with how-to tricks, updates on worldwide hacker feuds and busts, and a tough, political-minded defense of hacking and its enervated companion, phone phreaking (the high-tech defiling of Ma Bell). No mention of Grumman, though.

But hidden among all the other goodies was a list of computer bulletin boards (BBSs) loosely affiliated with the magazine. I switched on the PC, called one of the numbers—a "Miscellaneous exchange"—and borrowed a list.

I'd been riding the hi-state boards for over a year, and at first I didn't see anything so different about this one. There was the usual pile of messages, friendly exchanges and occasional swipes, points of information and wisecracks. Subjects ranged from politics and music to personal-computer tech—mostly some notable additions, including general discussions of hacking and phreaking. But as the posted messages scrolled up my screen I could see that the tone here was unusual in the generally conservative world of BBSs. Talk was looser here, more anarchic, people used handles rather than real names and actually swore without fear of getting booted by the folks who ran the board, the sysops (systems operators). There was a muted festivity to the place, as if somewhere nearby, maybe in a back room no one would tell me about, one motherfucker of a party was going on.

But there was nothing on the Grumman bust, so I scrolled through the section devoted to hyping other BBSs. There were some well-phrased appeals for calls, but the ad that caught my eye only readied to Long Island area code to join the hook.

CALL 260 from the Midwest to the NY/PA/ME East: The Cardboard Box, 516-740-0101

My computer dated the network, the modem connected, and then suddenly I was facing the heaviest dose of paranoia I'd ever encountered on a board. The BBS program asked for my handle (Dr. Bombay) and then slapped me with a questionnaire asking me to (a) declare that I was not an employee of any long-distance phone company or any local, state, or federal law enforcement agency, (b) identify a series of cryptic technical terms and acronyms, and (c) leave a note to the sysop, Wintermute, and his copious the X25 Warrior and the Big Kahuna, describing some of my hacking exploits. I passed the first part with flying colors, bullshitted my way miserably through the second, and confessed in the third that my greatest exploit was subscribing to 2600. So much for that board. After that performance they'd never let me in. I was back to square one.

A few days later I checked the board to see whether I'd been validated. I stayed through the log-in procedure and waited for the brush-off. It didn't come—I'd been granted full access. I was in.

I cut straight to the message base and worked my way down the menu. The e-mail section was unreadable, nothing but private messages. The PHREAKING section was full of phone company techno-babble and strange tales of making pay phones

do things they weren't designed to. In HACKING the messages listed phone numbers and passwords for all kinds of computers—university, corporate, NASA, PRATES' LAIR was the "water" section, a place to trade illegally copied commercial software. In CARDING there were messages on how to scam office people's credit card numbers and use them safely. The more I read, the wider my eyes bulged. Whoever these people were—the Signal Jacks, Don Hackaday, Exile—they were hardcore.

I checked my amazement and headed for the HACKING NEWSBUSTS section. A good idea; the second message that scrolled up brought the news of the Grumman bust to the board, and in the third Wintermute dropped the bomb that the unnamed misin in the papers, on TV, on the radio, was more likely A-TNT, until recently a regular at the Box. With this the conversation quickly heated up. How could they be sure it was him? Would he merit? Would they bust the board? As the days and messages scrolled by, though, it became clear that the board was safe, and the questions grew more philosophical. For instance, was A-TNT, or was he not, a larmer?

Larmer, if seemed, was the ultimate sin around here, and not everybody was sure A-TNT was guilty. "He wasn't such a bad guy. He was just getting started," wrote the Mechanic. "It's too bad."

"People got excited because they got bang," Mirage suggested. But the Watchman wasn't going for it: "Larry... larmer... I don't see much difference. If you make a mistake you're larmer. So you're all larmer to an extent... but, whether you're the old test hacker or the innocent larmer who'd it takes a BIG fuck-up to get busted."

Whatever A-TNT was, though, he sure wasn't the whiz kid the media was calling him. "Shit, he was making me feel like," cracked the Mechanic, "and you KNOW he wasn't no genius." But what else was new? The media got it wrong again. Pretty soon the little larmer would be on "Gerald," repeating of his evil ways, highlighting the old folks with tales of smolder-sneaking, slinked hacker cuts.

"What is it when you see a computer user on TV it is always some total fucking random-GEKK" asked the Watchman, clearly pissed-off. "Why don't they ever show computer users like me, chopping fluids and dropping on Marlboro 100s in our bedrooms? I drive and fucking BBS all day!"

I was starting to wonder myself. The moment I dropped in here I knew I had found that back-room party at last. These people were having the time of their adolescent lives, and they were doing it with enough style and attitude to qualify for full-fledged MTV-sanctioned youth subculture status. All right, so maybe A-TNT wasn't a larmer, but who wanted to read another morose play about a computer delinquent scared straight by a brush with the law? The real story was still on the loose, and I was staying right at it.

The only problem was that a mountain of hacker paranoia was standing between me and the story. There are good reasons trust is such a hard-won and fragile commodity down in the computer underground. Since the bowery "Vice Games" days of the early 80s, the federal and state governments have criminalized the shit out of hacking—by last year every state but pinto Vermont had passed laws against computer trespassing and "hack" and the



Federal Computer Fraud and Abuse Act of 1986 had made hacking punishable by anywhere from one year to 10.

After a brief period of relative impunity, hackers were beginning to go to jail. That kind of atmosphere tightens definitions of common sense. On boards around the country, the elite hacker group Legion of Doom was circulating a novice's guide that warned against leaving your real phone number on any BBS ("no matter how cool it seems") or sharing real-life information with any one you didn't know too well.

"Don't be afraid to be paranoid," the guide concluded. "Remember, you *are* breaking the law. It doesn't hurt to store everything encrypted on your hard disk, or keep your notes buried in the backseat of the trunk of your car. You may feel a little funny, but you'll feel a lot funnier when you meet Bruno, your transvestite cellmate who axed his family to death."

Still, I got the feeling that even if the dangers didn't exist at all hackers would have to invent some. The main thrill of the hack may indeed be, as the LOD intro insists, "the pursuit and capture of knowledge," but paranoia is at least part of the kick. As the pop culture industry is quick to recognize (see humor-writer Chet Day's new book *The Hacker* for a deliciously schlocky tale of an elite hacker board infiltrated not by the feds but by a terrorizing demon

Pretty soon the little larmer
would be an "Geraldo,"
repenting of his evil ways,
frightening the old folks with
tales of sneaker-
worshipping skinhead
hacker cults.

handled "The Succubus"), the technology just lends itself to cloak-and-dagger drama.

So it wouldn't do for me to start asking pesky-reporter questions. If I specked the phreak/hackers who populated the place they might scatter, leaving me with the blood of a dead BBS on my hands. I decided to approach the sysops instead. On my computer I carefully composed a text file suggesting we meet and explaining my intentions and my sympathy towards hackers. Then I called the Box, uploaded the text to Wintermute in the private file-transfer section, logged off, and crossed my fingers.

I called back the next day, adrenalin rushing as soon as I saw that I had private mail from the sysops. But it was only a message acknowledging that they'd received the file. I called back again the following day. No answer. I called later in the week. Still nothing.

My nerves were frizzling, but at least the waiting gave me time to browse the message bases and get a better picture of the board. Slowly I began to figure out what any seasoned member of the computer underground would have sensed at first glance: the Cardboard Box was not to be confused with a pirate board. This was a hack/phreak board, dedicated primarily to the mutual education of its members in the arts of second-story telecommunications.

According to Northern Illinois University

criminologist Gordon Meyer (I downloaded his master's thesis from the Box's database), there are roughly a hundred such boards in existence, varying widely in quality (the warez boards, where uploading and downloading pirated software is the main activity, outnumber the hv's by about 20 to one).

I also got to know the players. There was the Fence Ranger who called in regularly from Chicago to rant about the lameness of "warez dOOLz." There were one or two other out-of-staters, and occasionally someone would drop in from England or Switzerland. The rest of the 20 or so regulars were spread out between deep Long Island and far Manhattan—not a huge area, but diverse. When Exile, an inner-city caller of color, referred to A-T-N-T with the generic "nigga," he got back a cheerful explanation from the "burban Big Kahuna" to the effect that the kid didn't appear to be black in any of the pictures he'd seen. In the obligatory MUSIC section, similar culture clashes flared and fizzled—the Mechanic, calling from the heart of the Boogie-Down Bronx, went toe-to-toe with the metalheads and prog-rockers for a while in fuck-you defenses of hip hop, house, and reggae. Then he gave up in a confusion of secret love for Genesis and Phil Collins.

I was learning all kinds of things. Except why the sysops weren't responding to my letter. A week had passed since I uploaded it. I called again, planning to leave another anxious, nudgy message. Instead, there it was. Cortact:

FROM: WINTERMUTE
TO: DR. BOMBAY
SUBJECT: ARTICLE...
A REPLY TO #204

What... What... OK I might be able to manage the X25 Warrior and Big Kahuna meeting you sorry we can't give out addresses or phone #s... I have a few conditions... don't put any real handles or board names... also... I would appreciate it if you would say clearly that hackers don't destroy anything on a system, they just want to learn how to use it... also... A contribution to the BBS for a 35,000 BAUD modem would be appreciated!

I didn't back my heels because there wasn't room under my desk. I just sent Wintermute a message saying I didn't think SPIRIT would cough up modem money but the other conditions would be no problem.

After all, why not help clean up the hackers' public image? It was sad but true enough that the "threat" of computer viruses has censored the media, which had in general been too lazy to find out that in the hack/phreak community planting a destructive virus was something you might do to a rival bulletin board but never to a hacked system. And why wouldn't the media call bullshit on corporate claims of huge losses to the computer underground? The software industries were claiming they lost billions of dollars a year to piracy. The phone companies claimed a million a day bled to phreaking. No one ever pointed out that they were talking about "theft" of goods that didn't disappear from the shelves when stolen and would not have been used anyway if they had to be paid for. Information technology had a tendency to make us

information piddlers—journalists like me—look stupid, and it was hardly fair that hackers suffered for our lameness.

So sure, I would gladly do what I could to make amends. I told Wintermute—as long as we could meet and talk. "Just give me a time and place," I said.

Another long week passed. Finally I got this message:

FROM: WINTERMUTE
TO: DR. BOMBAY
SUBJECT: ARTICLE...
A REPLY TO #339

I am having problems... Nobody wants to meet you, they think you are gonna appear with a dozen cops or something...

For Christ's sake, I sighed and typed out a reply:

FROM: DR. BOMBAY
TO: WINTERMUTE
SUBJECT: ARTICLE...
A REPLY TO #339

What would it take to convince you I'm not a narc? What do you want? My American Express card number so you guys can fuck my life up if I double cross you? I don't know. This is a little depressing. I mean, I only have about half a story if I can't meet with anybody. What would it take?

The next day's e-mail brought this:

FROM: WINTERMUTE
TO: DR. BOMBAY
SUBJECT: ARTICLE...
A REPLY TO #340

What... If we wanted you AMEX, it was would have it already... As soon as I talk to Kahuna we will call you and see what happens...

The bravado was gangster-movie pretense. I had to laugh.

But nobody called. After a couple days I logged onto the Box again and got a message from Big Kahuna asking for my social security number. I thought about it: I'd already given them my real name and real phone number. What more could they do with the SS#? I typed it in. Then I downloaded some bedtime reading from the board's library of text files and logged off.

I could have picked better bedtime reading. The file I'd leached turned out to contain two brief Newsweek articles by a reporter named Richard Sanzela. The first recounted his undercover adventures as "Montana Wildhack" on hack/phreak boards around the country. The second described the hacker response to the first story after it appeared: Sanzela was vilified throughout the hacker world, inundated with crank calls, and found his credit history fucked with and his car numbers painted all over the BBS nation. Not a soothing tale. I managed to convince myself that the reason he had caught so much hell was that he had used real board names and handles. Even so, there was no telling what might piss off some small group of hackers.

somewhere and set me up for the same bitch of a time. I went to sleep sure I'd given up my social security number.

Five days later I called him back, E-mail: the Big Kahuna had discovered my address. Big deal. They already had my name and phone number; they could have gotten the address out of the phone book. I dialed off a quick tin and moved on to the next letter vowing for me. It went a little something like this:

FROM: WINTERMUTE
TO: DR. BOMBAY
SUBJECT: CHECK THIS SHIT OUT

Y2K5 - PROCEED
AND CHIBBELL, AKA

*CHIBBELL JULIAN SINCE HIS-88
*FBI HUBS FH-302 TRAF. APTD 8888
*SLM-0188-1088, FRI-01-88, FH-88,
*ACTS-2: HC-30-470, 2-ONE-5.
*BLSID CDO APTD DRND MC TRAFS 888
*PID RT 30105190 MR DRND ACCOUNT NO
*01 190604259 10889 01888 470 470 01 00
*00 01 01 37195233500
*02 190604259 01889 10888 0 0 01 00 00
*00 10 37195233500
END OF REPORT

My mouth flapped open. It was brief and pathetic, but it was my credit history, and my American Express card numbers gleamed in its midst like a pair of hot rhinestones. This should only have interrupted my years of a few nights earlier, but all I felt was a mixture of astonishment and admiration.

My hands gripped the keyboard to enter a reply. I didn't know what to say. Suddenly the cursor jumped out of my control and started spelling:

May die. It said.

In a bedroom or a bathroom somewhere in the S16 area, Wintermute had broken into Chad's room. I typed back:

—Hi. That is just impressive stuff.
—May. It is no big deal. ... I don't worry I spent most my card the day over the place...

We got to talking.

—Oh, I mind you nothing how old I am?
—Sorry I wasn't know.
—Just being a reporter.
—Wait... should I make the story dramatic and say I am R or should I tell you my real one?
—The truth would be fine.
—Oh, wait... I just wanted to be disappointed.

Fifteen, Jesus.

—How about the other system?
—Wait X25 Warrior is 14 and Big Kahuna is 16-17 I really don't know.
—I guess over meet in person?
—Yeah... me and the Warrior hung out all the time. Big Kahuna, we've never met.
—I never met him and you let him run the board with you? How can you trust him?

—I trust him more than I trust you, I can tell you that...

But he kept talking. He told me hacking was fun and I should try it. He gave me the numbers of some hacked-out systems to call. This all took a long time. The cursor crawled across and down the screen like a maddeningly slow game of Centipede. Two hours later my eyes were bloodshot rheumy gaudier from staring at the monitor and the conversation was ending on a sour note. My questions had gotten too personal and Wintermute suddenly wanted every detail worth printing off the record. As we said goodbye and signed off I thought it might be the last time I heard from him. I could see the whole story disappearing back into the electronic depths it had emerged from.

I turned off the computer and shuffled out of my bedroom in a daze. On the TV in the kitchen Ted Koppel was announcing the fall of the Berlin Wall. Right now it was history, but in a few weeks big fat AOL, every phreaker's favorite long-distance company, would be using this same footage in ads, as if it had been some basic human urge to tell someone else that had smashed the wall. They weren't entirely wrong. People were fighting for a number of things in Eastern Europe, but would anyone deny that the free circulation of news, stock market prices and music videos were high on the list?

On the TV in the kitchen the nuclear age was completing its transition to the information age. War, grace, commerce, fun—none of these would be the same anymore. It was still possible of course that the new age would turn out to be just a digital remastering of the old one. We would measure the new stockpiles in megabytes rather than megatons, but they'd be stockpiles nonetheless—endless lists of data, names and numbers and the power that goes with them. Still, as long as three teenagers on a telecomms provide could pick the corporate lock on those lists, there was a chance things might be different this time around. I might never speak to Wintermute again. But it was reassuring to know he was out there.

Wintermute didn't disappear. In a few days he and the Big Kahuna and the X25 Warrior started conference-calling my apartment. I was never home when they called—I'd get in and find a series of extended messages on my machine, three high-pitched adolescent boy voices cracking jokes, chattering among themselves, laughing uncontrollably and making rude comments on my letter in outgoing message music. It was like the Beastie Boys had taken over my answering machine.

Finally they left a number I could call and leave a voice message at. They had passed a voice mailbox. VMIs are those automated answering-machine systems you get nowadays when you call big firms, and it turns out they are eminently hackable. Find an unward box in the system, hack out its password, and it's yours (not phreaker but lets use them as safe places to trade phone calls)—until somebody at the office discovers your coup and kills the box.

The boys' VMIs were still good. I left a time they could definitely get hold of me. They called back. We talked for two hours. I was full of questions:

Like, what was the point? What did you do since you got inside a forbidden computer?

Well, first of all you didn't destroy anything. That was rule number one. But that left a lot of room. You could take a look at some pretty interesting things the boys claimed that on a NASA computer once they found a report about a fatal crash that never made it to the press. You could also use some systems as gateways to networks brimming with other computers. You could even set up a hidden, private BBS. The Mechanic, they told me, was in the process of doing just that on a Vax he'd hacked down in New Jersey. But all these things mostly ended in the fog (challenge was getting in. "Once you're in," said the Kahuna, "it's like, 'Mechanic. That was fun. What next?'").

And what were the naive systems and networks to hack into?

Well, Arsenal, the defense department's research network, was certainly one of them. Then there were the credit report companies—CR, TRW. There were three good ways in get passwords for their computers. One was to go "travelling," poking around in the garbage of a credit-database client to see what carelessly discarded printouts might reveal. Another was "social engineering"—calling up database users and putting on your best grown-up voice to bullshit a password out of them. If neither of these suited your style, you could always just trade for the passwords with whatever card shit you might



have—a pile of coffee, some VMIs.

And what about the stereotypes of hackers? Were they math prodigies?

No, not really. The Kahuna sucked at math in 8th, did much better in English. And none of the three knew much about programming. Knowing how to program would help, of course, and the most elite hackers knew at least one programming language, but it wasn't necessary—hacking wasn't a system of rules, it was a craft.

Well, were they loners then? Troubled kids? Lovers, no—they all had plenty of friends. Kahuna went to parties on the weekends, played a lot of pick-up football. But troubled? Well, they were teenagers. "All my friends are troubled," said the Warrior, "and most of them don't know anything about computers."

The boys were sharp. They were funny and in a gruff teen-boy way they were friendly too. I liked them and I looked forward to their phone calls, which began coming fairly regularly after the first contact. I remained uneasy though. Every time I pushed for a face-to-face meeting, they would

Continued on page 40



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caply put me off. My deadline loomed and I still hadn't clinched the story.

It never even occurred to me that they might know the story better than I did, but they did, and they'd been feeding it to me in little doses all along, a tidbit here, a plaintext there. The sly little bastards were trying to show me how easy it was to get hooked on hacking, and they were doing a pretty good job. The rush I got when I first called the DMZ, called fucking Francis and didn't pay a penny! kept me coming back for more. And when I slipped into the Macintosh's pretty Mac, my first actual illegal entry, I suddenly had a glimpse of what it was all about. These were low-grade commercial buyers, sub-ware World activity, but they were hearty enough that I finally understood Winterman's uncharacteristically rapturous declarations that he would never give up hacking as long as he lived.

But I still had to meet the boys.

Then one week they didn't call. Caught up in other assignments, I didn't have time to drop by the Box, but the silence was making me jittery. I was poring over the underground. It couldn't hurt, I decided at the end of the week, to give the board a quick call and see what was up. I twiddled on the computer and dialed up the Confidential Box. There was no answer. That wasn't good. If the hard disk on Winterman's computer had failed, it could be hours before he got the board back up. When I called later that night the board was still down. Fuck! Well, it would be back up the next day.

But the next day there was still no answer from the Confidential Box. I was really uptight now. The boys' VMR had died and I still didn't know any of their home phone numbers. The story was disappearing again. There was only one way left to get in touch with them. It was a long shot, but fuck it, at least it would give me some kind of hacker world fix.

So there I was, eleven o'clock Saturday night, back in the DMZ again. I'd jumped into the Big Kahuna a couple times before. Maybe he'd be there tonight. The list of handles was long, but no Big Kahuna. There was nothing to do but wait.

Which wasn't so bad. The DMZ was a fun place to hang out. You just sat there and people sent you messages. Occasionally you got a rare one from one of the gay French locals who seemed to be drawn to the DMZ by its high teenage unemployment count. No doubt their presence flustered the hackers, who in general liked a big joke as much as the best American

adolescent, but the hackers' own approaches didn't seem a lot less prudent sometimes. "Got any codes?" was the standard opening line. It could spark a nice conversation, but as often as not it led straight to a quick and dirty exchange of digits.

There was a lot of codes-cruising going on that night. I was having a hard time keeping up since I didn't have any in offer. Finally I decided to just go ahead and identify myself as a reporter and see what happened. The results were good: within 10 minutes I was carrying on ten full-blown conversations at the same time. One was with Gestaq, a 16-year-old New Age anarchist Debian fan from Phoenix. The other was with a guy whose handle identified him as the epitome of the DMZ, said he was a 28-year-old French issue! U.S. Air Force lieutenant colonel who'd been running the system out of his home for two years.

Identity theft was even more fluid than on regular boards, since you could log on with any handle you felt like, and even change your handle as often as you cared to within a single session. I was logged on as "Scramp" at the moment. Last session I was "Scratch," before that I was "Richard Marx."

Scramp was getting sleepy. I was sending farewell messages to Gestaq and the cryptic when a message came through from someone tagged Internet, and plainly identified as calling from the USA:

Hi!-a.

Hi, I typed. Where u calling from?

The USA, came the reply.

Great. More paranoia. Well, this would take care of Internet. DM huh? What. don't mind the questions. It's my job. I'm a reporter for Spin magazine.

The reply took a little while in get back to me:

—Dr Blumhau?

—Big Kahuna????

—DM... No idea is Winterman.

Hi.

—OH NE man. Sorry I've been put off touch for so long...

—What. its no problem. But you missed it... Big shit at the Stenal Jack's house with Grumman recently...

The news was bad. Sort of. Grumman security had traced the Signal Society and a number of other local hackers trying to log onto the sister Convention. But that had been A.D.M.'s undoing. And now they were making house calls in the company of Nassau County police officers and an unidentified guy

with "led" written all over him. They didn't have a lot on the signal jockey so it didn't look like they were going to press charges, but the story didn't end there. The jock's mom knew the Big Kahuna's mom and told her about the visit. After that it didn't take long for Mr. and Mrs. Kahuna to figure out why their son had been spending so much time with his computer, and boy were they pissed. They took his machine away and grounded him for a year.

It got worse. One of the kids Gorman had swapped down on was cusscop for Quin Kist, a board in the neighboring 718 area. Right away the other synops pulled the BBS down, and Wintermute, scared-shales Gorman would be coming for him next, took the hint. He wiped all the BBS files off his hard disc and moved the board anonymously.

The Cardboard Box was closed.

In the week that followed lunch met Korcoran at Atalia, and the boys agreed to meet me in Manhattan. It was a strange and insular world. The military-industrial complex had succeeded in killing the Cardboard Box, but there was suddenly a good chance it wouldn't survive the century itself. The janitor national security state was scrambling to find a new rationale for its undercover

sherutagist, but hacken were already living in a world in which covert action was nothing more than a game children played. The future was rushing towards us faster than the past could get out of the way.

Appropriately enough, the boys and I agreed to rendezvous in front of a science-fiction bookstore we all knew. The Kahuna wouldn't make it of course. He was still under house arrest.

There was some slight doubt about how we'd recognize each other, but when the time came I spotted them before I'd gotten within two blocks of the bookstore: two sweet-faced, slightly chubby generic white teens, working hard at looking inconspicuous. One of them looked like he had a couple of growth spurts to go. Both of them had their hands deep in the pockets of clothes that looked like last year's Christmas presents. I settled up and muttered, "Got any cash?" The boys laughed, and we all tried to quickly get over the weirdness of having faces stuck to our names. The short one was the X25 Warrior, the taller blond kid was Wintermute.

I took them to lunch. The Warrior got a cheeseburger; Wintermute ordered ribs and invited on Pepsi over Coke. They cracked jokes with the waitress, awkward and wine-soaked at the same time. We talked about how they

got into hacking, about the superiority of their Quad Amiga to my boring IBM, about the Big Kahuna's lead hack. We talked about the Cardboard Box. Neither of them seemed too sorry it was down. It had been going for over a year, a ripe old age for a backspaceboard. And with the modern freed up Wintermute could do more of his own hacking now, spend hours scanning the entire 800-number exchanges, shit like that.

After lunch we walked around. We looked in computer-store windows. We dropped by a magazine shop that sold J600. I bought two copies for some friends, the Warrior bought one for himself, and Wintermute chortled another.

It was getting late, I'd have to head home soon. "Oh," said Wintermute, "but first you have to do something for us."

"Whatever?" I said.
"Well, OK. Well we'll give you the money, but um..." —his feet shuffled nervously—"OK, can you buy us a copy of Playboy? The one with Kimberly Conrad on the cover?" The Warrior giggled.

We went to three different newsstands looking for that issue, but none of them had it yet. Finally the boys decided they would settle for a copy of *Festa's*. I'd never bought alcohol for the underage before, and

certainly never dressed the first minutes I did it for would be capable of altering my credit history, but I didn't blink. They waited outside the store while I made the buy.

When I came out we opened the car right there on the street and headed for the subway wiggling. We were all grinning like idiots.

At the subway entrance I turned and said goodbye, and the boys walked off. They were going to catch a movie maybe, they didn't know. I watched as they made their way past a nearby newsstand. No Kimberly Conrad, but lots of headlines that supposedly added up in the end of history.

From where I stood it looked like the beginning. New struggles were brewing. Information capital was accumulating like crazy, and the gap between the info-haves and the info-have-nots was gaping wider all the time. Sooner or later it would start down to a fight, and whether they knew it or not, kids like the Big Kahuna, the X25 Warrior and Wintermute were among the first people to be on the right side.

I saw Wintermute take one last gulp of beer. Then the boys disappeared into the city crowds.

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